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Social Research (SOC 3070) Final Research Project

Q2S Enhancing Pedagogy Stipend Product

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Introduction

Social research courses teach burgeoning sociologists essential methodological and statistical skills of exploring the social world. It is a required course for Sociology majors at California State University, San Bernardino. In the quarter system, it is taught as a two-course sequence: Social Research I (SOC 307) and Social Research II (SOC 309). The first course of the sequence introduces students to core methods and introductory techniques of social research, while the second focuses on statistical techniques and various aspects of analyzing, interpreting, and presenting quantitative data. In the semester system, the two courses will be merged into one. This poses a challenge for us as instructors: how can we effectively plan a course that combines the former two courses into one and builds students' methodological, statistical, and analytical skills?

In addition to logistical - course merging and planning - tasks, the course also poses considerable pedagogical challenges. First, students enter the course with varied backgrounds in mathematics and statistics. Second, some students dread mathematics. Research shows that students can develop fixed mindsets vis-à-vis mathematics, making them more likely to give up on difficult problems and less likely to respond positively to feedback about their performance (Boaler 2015). The realities of teaching social research, combined with the logistical challenge of combining two quarter courses into one semester course, requires us as instructors to invest in careful planning.

Here, we present a detailed final research project and corresponding assignments that, based on pedagogical research literature and our cumulative teaching experience, is designed to ignite students' curiosity, boost their confidence, and build skills that they can take beyond the classroom. This final research project assignment was created with the following pedagogical principles in mind.

1. It is driven by *project-based learning*. Project-based learning is a comprehensive approach to teaching that uses authentic problems to engage students in the learning process (Blumenfeld et al. 1991, Boaler 1998; similar ideas are presented in Smith et al. 2005 and Pfeffer et al. 2012).
2. It incorporates best practices in *cooperative learning*, such as working in groups and giving/receiving peer-reviews from *base groups* (Smith et al. 2005, Johnson and Johnson 1999).
3. It is *process-* (rather than grade-) *oriented* and builds motivation through creating the *value* of the project (Blumenfeld et al. 1991).

This product, if implemented successfully, will not only assess students' proficiency in key methodological and statistical aspects of social research but will also serve as a valuable experience for those who will later work in any team settings or continue to advance their education in graduate programs.

Final Project Description

The final project described here will constitute the major assessment for the social research course. For this assignment, students will have to choose a research question from a list of ten (see Appendix A for the list) and work in pairs, throughout the semester, to analyze General Social Survey data (Smith et al. 2018; see the ScholarWorks repository for the data extract and codebook) and produce a research report that follows the basic structure of a scholarly research paper and includes an introduction, data and methods section, results, and policy implications (see Appendix B for the research project instructions).

The purpose of this assignment is to help students learn the following skills:

- Writing research questions and hypotheses
- Identifying appropriate statistical tests
- Performing descriptive and inferential statistics in statistical software SPSS
- Choosing appropriate statistical tests
- Interpreting statistical tests
- Conveying research findings in writing

The course will be structured and planned around the research project, meaning that every lecture, class activity, and lab assignment will be designed to help students learn the skills and knowledge essential for completing of the project. This approach follows the *project-based* learning principle which argues that knowledge is constructed by solving a complex problem (answering a research question that bears policy implications) that requires cognitive tools (methodological knowledge and statistical software), multiple sources of information (lectures, lab meetings, data analyses), and other individuals (instructor and peers) as resources (Blumenfeld et al. 1991).

The assignment we created incorporates best practices of *cooperative learning*. Collaborative learning requires students to rely on each other as contributors to knowledge (Caulfield and Persell 2006). In collaborative groups, students are active problem solvers who engage with their peers to test their ideas and develop new ones. In the truly cooperative group, students see their success (e.g., their grade on an assignment) as intertwined with the success of their group members. As mentioned above, students will be working on the project in two-person teams. In addition to that, each team will give to and receive peer feedback from *base groups*. Johnson and Johnson (1999) define base groups as peer groups that “give support, help, encouragement, and assistance each member needs to make progress and develop cognitively and socially in healthy ways” (p. 69). In the context of our social research course, base groups will consist of two student pairs working on the same research question. Each pair will give feedback to the other. The peer feedback will improve the projects, hone the analytical and critical thinking skills for those giving feedback, and teach those receiving feedback that writing is an ongoing process. The reviewers will follow the rubric that should help guide and structure their review (see Attachment B, The Criteria for Success table).

Finally, the project is designed to focus on the *process* (learning) rather than the *outcome* (grade). Extensive pedagogical literature suggests that process-based learning (Blumenfeld et al. 1991) fosters engagement and motivation. We will achieve this in three ways. First, students will choose their research question based on their and their partner's interest in the topic, which should help sustain intrinsic motivation and heighten the *value* of the work. To create value, we will also ask students to explicitly discuss the importance of their research question and suggest policy implications based on their research findings. Second, we will create a forum on Blackboard where students can ask emergent questions and help one another other through the research process. This is one of the ways to create and sustain a learning community and support the learning goals. Finally, scaffolding the major assignment into smaller (yet significant) milestones (See Appendix B, "Important Deadlines" table) and giving students the opportunity to revise and resubmit their work should also help to maintain our focus on the process of learning.

To measure the effectiveness of the final project, we plan to administer pre- and post-surveys to students (see Appendix C).

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Appendix A: Possible Research Questions and Class Activity

Instructions: With your partner, review the list of possible research questions, then discuss:

- Which questions interest you?
- Why?

By the end of the discussion, choose a single research question for your project.

Note: Many of these questions concern “demographic groups” or “demographic characteristics.” This refers to identities or social categories, like race, gender, sexual orientation, class background, citizenship status, nationality, etc. Sociologists often do research on inequality between demographic groups. While sociologists generally think of these demographic characteristics as influencing each other, you should consider them separately. For example, instead of thinking about the impact of being a Black woman on some outcome, think about the impact of being Black and the impact of being a woman separately. There are ways to consider demographic characteristics simultaneously, but they won’t be covered in this course.

1. Which demographic groups experience the most workplace stress?
2. How does experiencing discrimination at work impact job satisfaction?
3. How does religiosity impact support for a woman’s right to abortion?
4. Which demographic groups are most likely to engage in risky sexual behaviors?
5. How does gender and citizenship affect income?
6. What demographic characteristics predict completing a bachelor’s degree or higher?
7. What is the relationship between health and happiness?
8. Which demographic characteristics predict support for traditional gender roles?
9. How do demographic characteristics affect support for gun control?
10. Does race influence support for criminal justice reform?

Appendix B: Research Project Instructions and Rubric

Important Deadlines

Date	Turn in...	Assignment	Points
[Week X]	Bring two paper copies to class	Introduction section - first draft	10
[Week X, following week from above]	Blackboard	Introduction section - second draft	10
[Week X]	Blackboard	Descriptive statistics table	10
[Week X]	Bring two paper copies to class	Data & Methods section - first draft	10
[Week X, following week from above]	Blackboard	Data & Methods section - second draft	10
[Week X, end of lab]	Blackboard	Analysis	10
[Date during finals week]	Blackboard	Report	50
Anytime during the semester	Blackboard	Confirmation of your attendance at the CSUSB or SBS Writing Center	5

Purpose

One of the objectives of our course is to design and implement a research study. In addition to giving you an opportunity to investigate a topic that interests you, doing your own research study will help you build valuable skills for your future career *and* become a more discerning reader of research.

The purpose of this assignment is to help you practice the following skills:

- Writing research questions and hypotheses
- Identifying appropriate statistical tests
- Performing descriptive and inferential statistics in SPSS
- Choosing appropriate statistical tests
- Interpreting statistical tests
- Conveying research findings in writing

Task

The final product for this assignment is a report of your research. It consists of four sections (check off each requirement as you go!):

- ☐ **An Introduction section, which includes...**
 - ☐ **A research question.**
 - ☐ **A brief discussion of the importance of your research question.** You might explain why policymakers should know the answer to the research question, for example.
 - ☐ **Two hypotheses.** Explain your reasoning behind the hypotheses.
- ☐ **A Data and Methods section, which includes...**
 - ☐ **A description of the dataset.** Explain where it came from, what the target population is, what the sample size is, and what year the data were collected.
 - ☐ **An identification of your dependent and independent variables.**
 - ☐ **A description of how variables are measured.** This includes the survey question used to measure each variable and each variable's level of measurement (categorical, ordinal, or numerical).
 - ☐ **A description and justification of the statistical procedures used to test the hypotheses.** This should reference the level of measurement of each variable.
- ☐ **A Results section, which includes...**
 - ☐ **A table of descriptive statistics.** For each of your variables, include meaningful descriptive statistics that help your reader understand the distribution of each variable. You should include frequencies for categorical and ordinal variables and central tendencies (mean or median (if median is different from the mean)) for numerical variables.
 - ☐ **Descriptions of the statistical procedures used to test each hypothesis.**
 - ☐ **Relevant tables and graphs.** You should have at least one table per hypothesis. Graphs are not required, but can be helpful.
 - ☐ **Descriptions of the pattern in the data or the size of the difference between groups.** For example, "males work 2 hours more than females, on average."
 - ☐ **Interpretations of your statistical tests, including inferential statements.** This includes commenting on the null hypothesis and statistical significance of the test.
- ☐ **A Conclusion section, which includes...**
 - ☐ **A restatement of the research question and purpose of the study.**
 - ☐ **A summary of your findings.** Taken overall, what do your analyses mean for your research question and hypotheses?
 - ☐ **A discussion of the policy implications of the findings.** For example, a finding that new parents struggle to balance work and parental responsibilities might lead to a policy suggestion of a paid parental leave or flexible workplace arrangements.

- ☐ **A References section (if needed).** Provide the [full APA citation](#) for each source you used.

In addition to including these sections, your paper should:

- ☐ **Pay attention to writing mechanics and organization.** Make sure to reread your report for typos. Use transition sentences and section headers (Introduction, Data and Methods, Results, Conclusion, References). Organize your report so that each paragraph answers the next question that would naturally come to your reader's mind. Provide accurate and complete [APA-style in-text citations](#).

Criteria for Success

The following rubric is used to evaluate milestone activities (e.g., the Introduction and Data and Methods sections drafts) as well as the final paper. Note that for the final paper, the Results section is weighted twice as heavily as the other three sections of the paper.

Criteria	Grade
Introduction	
The introduction is cohesive and well-written. It achieves three goals: 1) states the research question; 2) discusses its importance; and 3) states the hypotheses to be tested. It is clear what the independent and dependent variables are and what the authors expect to find.	10
Achieves the above goals but requires minor edits (e.g., spelling and grammar or formatting issues).	9
Achieves the above goals but some parts are ambiguous/lack clarity. Contains spelling and/or grammar errors.	8
Does not address one necessary aspect – research question, its importance, or hypotheses OR is unclear, underdeveloped, or erroneous (e.g., independent and dependent variables are mixed up or some sentences are contradictory/logically inconsistent).	7
Is poorly written: it is incomplete and/or is disorganized and/or does not address at least one major goal. It lacks clarity, logical flow, and cohesiveness.	6 or below
Data and Methods	
The methods section is cohesive and thorough. It: 1) describes the dataset used (where it came from, what the target population is, what sample size is, what year the data was collected); 2) clearly states the dependent and independent variables; 3) discusses how the variables are measured and correctly identifies the level of measurement for each variable (i.e. categorical, ordinal or	10

numerical); 4) describes and justifies the statistical procedures to be used in order to test the hypotheses (e.g., “in order to test H1, we will use the Chi-square test because both variables are nominal”).	
Achieves the above goals, but requires minor edits (e.g., spelling and grammar or formatting issues).	9
Achieves the above goals, but some parts might be slightly ambiguous, unclear or contain grammar/style errors.	8
Does not address one necessary aspect (1-4 above) OR is unclear, underdeveloped, or erroneous (e.g., levels of measurement are incorrectly identified).	7
Is poorly written: it is incomplete and/or is disorganized and/or does not address at least one major goal. It lacks clarity, logical flow, and cohesiveness.	6 or below
Results	
The results section is cohesive and thorough. It: 1) details statistical procedures used; 2) presents relevant tables and graphs, including a descriptive statistics table; 3) describes the pattern in the data or size of the difference between groups (e.g., males work 2 hours more than females, on average); 4) makes clear and correct inferential statements based on statistical tests conducted.	20
Achieves the above goals, but requires minor edits (e.g., spelling and grammar or formatting issues).	18
Achieves the above goals, but some parts might be slightly ambiguous, unclear or contain grammar/style errors.	16
Does not address one necessary aspect (1-4 above) OR is unclear, underdeveloped, or erroneous (e.g., incorrectly interprets a p-value).	14
Is poorly written: it is incomplete and/or is disorganized and/or does not address at least one major goal. It lacks clarity, logical flow, and cohesiveness.	12 or below
Conclusion	
The conclusion section is cohesive and thorough. It: 1) restates the research question and purpose of the study; 2) summarizes the findings and draws conclusions about the hypotheses; and 3) discusses policy implications of the findings.	10
Achieves the above goals, but requires minor edits (e.g., spelling and grammar or formatting issues).	9

Achieves the above goals, but some parts might be slightly ambiguous, unclear or contain grammar/style errors.	8
Does not address one necessary aspect (1-3 above) OR is unclear, underdeveloped, or erroneous (e.g., states irrelevant or unrealistic policy implications).	7
Is poorly written: it is incomplete and/or is disorganized and/or does not address at least one major goal. It lacks clarity, logical flow, and cohesiveness.	6 or below

Resources for Success

1. College of Social and Behavioral Sciences Writing Lab: SB-354.
Schedule an appointment at mywco.com/writinglab.
2. The CSUSB Writing Center
Schedule an appointment at <https://csusb.mywconline.com/>
3. The OWL APA Formatting Guide:
https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/research_and_citation/apa_style/apa_formatting_and_style_guide/general_format.html

Appendix C: Assessment of the Final Project's Effectiveness

Pre- and post-surveys will include the following items, all measured on a 5-point Likert scale (strongly agree to strongly disagree):

*Note: pre-survey wording is in brackets.

Mindset: (Dweck 2006)

- “You have a certain amount of intelligence, and you can’t really do much to change it.”
- “Your intelligence is something about you that you can’t change very much.”
- “You can learn new things, but you can’t really change your basic intelligence.”

Value: “I feel that skills I learned in this call will be useful to me in my profession.”

Interest: “I am interested in learning more about how to do research.”

Working in groups:

- “I feel comfortable collaborating on a project with others.”
- “I have the skills to collaborate with others on a project (e.g., voicing my opinion, holding other people and myself accountable, etc).”
- “I can learn something from my peers.”
- “I enjoy working in a group.”

Comfort:

- “I am comfortable [with the prospect of] doing statistics.”
- “I am comfortable [with the prospect of] doing research.”

Confidence: [Post-test only]

- “I am confident in my ability to do statistics.”
- “I am confident in my ability to do research.”
- “I am confident in my writing skills.”

Writing as a process:

- “Things I write can be improved through revision.”
- “It is important that I revise the things I write.”

Learning as a process:

- “I enjoy the process of learning.”
- “Getting a good grade is more important than learning skills and knowledge.”
- “I will build upon the skills and knowledge I [learn] learned in this class.”